

## AN AFRICAN ORCHESTRA IN GHANA

by

F. ONWONA OSAFO, Music Master, Government Secondary School, Tamale, N.T. Ghana.

All the different tribes and countries in Africa have their own peculiar musical instruments. There may be differences between the forms, and materials used for making the instruments locally, but there are undoubtedly certain similarities which can be observed by close examination.

In Europe, the instruments of the modern orchestra are divided into four departments—the strings, woodwinds, brass and percussion. An African orchestra has more or less the same divisions. The instruments are made from natural materials, plants, animals and metals obtainable in the region.

In Ghana, the string section of the African orchestra consists mainly of the native guitars and violins. They are of different shapes and sizes, and are generally made of wood, large calabashes or gourds, and animal skins or leather. The strings, which may be between four and six in number, are made from the sinews of a sheep, cow, cat or any other domestic or bush animal suitable for the purpose, although wire is sometimes used. Animal sinew is normally used for the bows of the native violins. The guitars are plucked and the violins are bowed, but on rare occasions they, also, are plucked. The tone quality of these two instruments vary. Some are calm, ethereal and penetrating, some are warm, rich and expressive, and others are nasal, harsh and serious.

A harp is used in the Northern Territories, especially in the Sissala and Dagali districts. It is made of hard grass or reeds, with strings of grass stretched across a rectangular or D-shaped frame. The tone quality of this instrument is delicate and radiant.

The instruments in the woodwind section are pipes, flutes and whistles. They are usually made of wood, cane, reed and bamboo. They range between 10 and 24 inches in length. The flutes have about six finger holes. Traditional pipes "*Afenteben*" and "*Odurugga*" are well-known among the Akans.

The brass section has few instruments, and they are not necessarily made of brass, but of other kinds of metal, tin, silver or iron. The Dagomba trumpet is a typical example of a metal wind instrument. The horns known by the Akan as "*Asommen*" or "*Mmentia*" are made of ivory and rarely from oxhorns and would also come under this section.

The last group of instruments is the percussion, which preponderate in the orchestra. They include drums of different sizes, as well as the gong-gong ("*dawuru*") tomtom ("*donno*"), castanets ("*Mfrikyywa*") xylophones and rattles.

In Ghana and in West Africa in general talking drums ("*Atumpan*") are the most important of all the drums and have been used to convey messages over great distances and in addition they are used to play traditional music. Akan names for other types of drums are: *Bommaa* (*Fɔntɔmfɔm* or *Kyenekeɛɛ*) *Etwi*, *Itente*, *Mpintin*, *Paso*, *Mmerema* (*Adikurogya*) *Atentemma*, *Nkrawiri*, *Mpebi*, *Prempe*, *Aburukuwa*, *Petepere*, *Osepetutu*, *Mmirie* and *Kyerenenkuku*.

Most of these drums are made of hard wood; but some other drums are made of large round gourds and calabashes. The membrane is skin or hide, an elephant's ear being the best material. In Akan territory, the *Fɔntɔmfɔm* or *Bommaa* is the biggest of all the drums. At times it is carried on the head by a special "carrier" while beaten by the drummer. Some of the drums are slung round the neck with leather strings while they are played.

The rattle is a large round gourd or calabash containing hard seeds or small pieces of gravel, and is usually played by women.

The castanets, "*Mfrikyywa*", are made of two small pieces of iron producing a dry rhythmic patten well suited to characteristic dances and rhythms.

The xylophone consists of flat pieces of wooden board tuned to a pentatonic scale with resonators underneath each note. The bars are struck with wooden beaters giving hard clattering sounds of definite pitch. The instrument is commonly used in the Dagati and Sissala districts.

The gong-gong (*dawuru*) consists of a single or a double iron hollow bar which is beaten with a wooden beater. Two bell-like tones are produced, which set the fundamental rhythm of the music. Nearly all the instruments are beautifully decorated.

Women are not allowed to play most of the instruments, especially the drums. Their duty is to accompany the orchestra by singing, dancing and clapping. The African orchestra mainly performs dance music, which is traditional and almost always in the form of folk poetry.

African orchestras are most active during specific social occasions; such as funeral ceremonies, enstoolment and destoolment of chiefs, national and tribal festivals. There are also orchestral performances for fighting and hunting dances as well as horse-dancing.

In Akan territory, it is usual for the talking drum player to start the orchestra by playing a drum message to call the players to prepare themselves. This drum signal is traditionally called "*Esono asom porow*", meaning "the shaking of the elephant's ear." The following is an example:—

*Adawura Kofi, ma wo ho mmere so.* "Adawura Kofi, rise up and display."

(Adawura Kofi is the name of the person who was supposed to be the founder of the gong-gong instrument).

This done, the gong-gong player starts to beat the chief rhythm of the music and control the tempo. He is followed by the "*Paso*" drum player who beats a second rhythm. Then the talking drum player, the most important of them all, follows up. He controls the whole orchestra. After this, the "*Fɔntɔmfɔm*" player supplies a deep and forceful foundation of tone to the music. If this drum orchestra is to be accompanied by pipes or flutes, then these instruments join in last.

It is the duty of the talking drum player both to start and to stop the orchestra. He stops the orchestra by playing a different and disconnected rhythm which is out of keeping with the rhythm of the music being played.

The different dance rhythms played by the various instruments of the orchestra can be written in the form of a score. An example of such a score called "*Abenemma Asaw*" (the dance for the children of a Chief) is shown.

Full Score of "Ahenemma Asaw" (The dance for the Chief's children)

The Instruments Dawuru (Gong-gong)								etc.
Paso								etc.
Mmeremma								etc.
Tomtom								etc.
Rattles								etc.
Atumpan (Talking drums)								etc.
Bɔmmaa								etc.

Note: Drumming Symbols: (1) = Simultaneous beating. (2) = Muzzling or stopping the drumming sound (3) = Staccato. (4) = High tone. (5) = Low tone. (6) = Emphasis.